The Puppets and the Puppet Master
– Patriarchal, Victorian Values and Melanie’s Coming-of-Age Journey in Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*

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Introduction

Although a fairy tale in its setting, Angela Carter’s novel *The Magic Toyshop* is a coming-of-age story with all the confusion, self-awareness, sexual awakening, sense of responsibility and social expectations that accompany the life of a teenager. The novel was published during the second wave of feminism in 1967, which makes it relevant to its time and the issues it discusses. Carter is known for her bold style and for raising the issues and struggles of women, especially related to sexuality. With her work, “she was at pains to overturn” and change the stigma of women’s role in society (Gordon, 30). In *The Invention of Angela Carter*, Edmund Gordon, through connecting pieces of her life, shows that the novel has an especially interesting backstory, in that it tells the story of the author herself. Gordon explains that Carter wrote this story to mirror her own experience as a teenager, and as an adult married woman. *The Magic Toyshop* was written while “she was plotting her escape from another oppressive domestic situation” (31), which was her toxic relationship to her first husband, Paul, to whom she was married at the time. Although it is an “exaggerated version”, Carter based the character Uncle Philp on Paul (90). Being married at the age of 19 is somewhat mirrored in the excitement and the rushed desire to be married, which is evident in the novel’s description of Melanie’s eagerness. The novel calls into “question some stereotypical roles of women in the 1960s while using the fairytale archetype to reinforce gender” (Coody, 6). *The Magic Toyshop*, thus, portrays Carter’s adolescent years through Melanie, but it also mirrors the difficult experience of her first marriage through Aunt Margaret: “[a]s the novel took shape, past and present collided in Angela’s imagination” (Gordon, 90). The struggles the women face in the novel also relate to prominent issues from the rigid Victorian era where women must endure inequality within their society and marriages. Women are expected to be pure, with no sexual interests, and to be ‘perfect’, obedient housewives. Therefore, I will argue that through the protagonist, Melanie, Carter’s novel *The Magic Toyshop* becomes an allegory of women’s struggles during their coming-of-age journeys. Moreover, Melanie’s journey demonstrates the effect that patriarchal, Victorian values have on both women and men.

*The Magic Toyshop* tells the story of Melanie, a 15-year-old girl from a wealthy family in England. From the very first pages, Melanie embarks on a journey to discover her body as she transforms from a girl into a woman. She is curious and eager to explore all the changes that she is going through, as it is a natural process during adolescence. However, she
is also scared and anxious about what it means to go through these changes and the kind of pressure it puts on her to be and look a certain way. Additionally, her parents die in a plane accident while away on holiday, which then sets Melanie on a different journey—one of uncertainty and more pressure and hardships. Her parents’ death, consequently, turned her life upside down and everything that she held dear and that gave her the sense of security and protection is gone. Suddenly, Melanie is left alone to discover the world and herself, along with her younger siblings: Jonathan and Victoria. As a minor, unable to take care of herself and her siblings, she is forced to leave the home that she loved and move to her estranged uncle’s house. Thus, it sets Melanie on an additional journey: to survive in these unforeseen circumstances, whilst trying to discover herself. She meets new people and faces new challenges that will change and shape her understanding of the social role expected of her as a woman by society. As we will see throughout the following analysis, these changes have an important impact on Melanie. The transitions she undergoes related to her relationships to the women in her life are the foundation of the analysis of the first chapter.

The novel is written with no indication of when it takes place. Thus, it becomes in a certain sense timeless, which means that it could take on a more universal meaning for women who struggle to negotiate values and rules. Even though Carter herself gave some indications that the novel relates to her own teenage years in the 50s, I want to argue, as mentioned, that the novel showcases a strong connection to the struggles of a long-passed era—The Victorian era. Although Carter was born long after the end of the Victorian era, that ended after Queen Victoria’s death in 1901, Sarah Gamble writes that “The Magic Toyshop’s consistent evocation of the Victorian period nevertheless enables it to be read as a neo-Victorian text” (Monarchs, 246). Literature that engages with Victorian culture and ideologies is classified as neo-Victorian; this emerged in the 1960s. The neo-Victorian novel seeks to examine the shifting relationship with the Victorian era since its end in 1901. Carter thus writes of the unremitting struggle women had endured based on the views and values of an era based on patriarchal rule. Because women continued to deal with social expectations, Carter’s novel can be seen as neo-Victorian story written to evoke the sense of emergency in the reader that women’s fight against patriarchal, Victorian values is far from over. This will be analyzed in the second chapter, along with the contrast between the experiences of men and women in the novel. To do this, I will take a closer look at Philip: the toy master who creates dolls for his own theater, enforcing his family members to attend and to participate in plays, symbolizing his authority.
Chapter 1: The Transitions

Melanie goes through three distinctive transitions throughout the novel, which I will analyze. These transitions can also be seen through her relationships with the three most prominent women in her life: her mother, her nanny and her aunt. Although I have put forth the subchapters as alluding to physical changes, Melanie’s transitions are in fact psychological.

From Child to Teenager

Already on the first page of the novel, Carter tells the story of a “tranced voyage”: an “exploration [of] the whole self” of a young girl who is about to embark onto a journey to adulthood. Melanie stares at herself for hours “naked, in the mirror of her wardrobe” (1). Fascinated by what she sees,

she would follow with her finger the elegant structure of her rib-cage where, the heart fluttered under the flesh like a bird under a blanket, and she would draw down the long line from breast-bone to naval … and she would rasp palms against her bud-wing shoulderblades. And then she would writhe about, clasping herself, laughing, sometimes doing cartwheels and handstands out of sheer exhilaration at the supple surprise of herself now she was no longer a little girl. (Carter, 1, italics mine)

The start of physical change in the very beginning of the novel is important, because not only does it tell her that she is changing but it also marks the beginning of her thoughts about being a woman. This triggers her views about her new identity. Those ideas revolve around being a wife and a sexual object in a world of fantasies of marriage. The thoughts are mainly a collection of her own naïve idealizations of her mother as representative of what a woman should be. This can be seen when she tries on her mother’s wedding dress. The scene is highly symbolic of her transition from child to young woman, while also revealing that she is far from ready for adulthood. She “wrestle[s] and fight[s]” the veil, finding the dress itself to be “very heavy… [and] too big”, so big that “two skinny Melanies could have worn the dress between them” (15). This scene shows that she idealizes her mother’s position as a married woman while realizing that she is still too young and cannot fill her shoes, or her dress. While
she feels pretty at first, she soon realizes that she is trying to fit into a role that is not suited for her, at least not yet. Carter paints a picture of Melanie standing in the garden realizing that she is still young and small in comparison to the world around her: “When she was [only] fifteen, she stood lost in eternity wearing a crazy dress, watching the immense sky” (18). The use of words such as “eternity” and “immense” shows the contrast between what she imagined before and what reality presents to her in this moment. This turns into a moment of realization where the coming-of-age transition is no longer something to celebrate but something to fear. It represents the journey she is about to embark on and that she might be taking on more than what she had bargained for: “[s]he was too young for it… [it was] [t]oo much, too soon” (18). This shows that she is not ready, and that she is trying to fast forward the process to become her mother. Melanie believed that “[her] mother must have been born dressed, perhaps in an elegant, well-fitting caul selected from a feature in a glossy magazine” (10). Her mother is the portrait of the perfect woman, which can only reinforce Melanie’s thinking: that a woman must be as perfect as the women seen in magazines. To add to this, Juliet, an acquaintance of Melanie’s, had married at the age of fourteen which causes Melanie to think that she “was growing old” and that “she can do nothing but deteriorate from now on” (9).

Melanie’s nanny, Mrs. Rundle, represents all of her fears of an unwanted future and is an embodiment of the deteriorated woman. Melanie views Mrs. Rundle as “fat, old, and ugly and [she] had never, in fact, been married. She adopted the married form by deed poll on her fiftieth birthday as her present to herself” (3). Clearly, Mrs. Rundle represents the fear Melanie feels that her future holds for her if she does not fulfill the expectations that are forced upon her by society— that she must be married at a young age, “beautiful” and thin. As Molly Hite states: “[A] threatening figure is the fat lady, the embodiment of woman’s insidious tendency to occupy more than her allotted space” (136). Melanie’s reaction to this issue causes her to worry, putting a strain on herself about how she looks. She tells of her fear “that if she ate too much of [bread pudding] she would grow fat, and nobody would ever love her and she would die virgin” (3). Melanie connects her odds of being married to her appearance, as it is important that a woman is thin to be seen as beautiful. This causes Melanie to feel anxious. She describes a vision of “[a] gargantuan Melanie, bloated as a drowned corpse on bread pudding, [reoccurring] in her dreams and she would wake in a sweat of terror” (Carter, 3-4). It shows that she is aware of her body’s desirability to the opposite sex and that her transition from girl to young woman requires her to prioritize things she did not need to care about before. As Hite further states: “[i]n order to be product, object,
or fetish, women must remain within boundaries ordained from outside, constricted to the dimensions that the dominate culture deems appropriate” (136). Because Mrs. Rundle is old, unmarried and unattractive, she does not conform to the constrictions of the norm and, therefore, she embodies Melanie’s fears of rejection at this stage. Melanie expresses further her awareness of the differences in requirements between her, as a girl, and her brother. She describes how “Jonathan ate like a blind force of nature, clearing through mounds of food like a tank through the side of a house” (3), as if to say that a boy has the freedom to consume as much food as he wants without this pressure and anxiety that haunt girls about their body image, their weight and figure. Women must always be beautiful and thin as it defines their social standing. This becomes a belief that constitute women’s identities and it is an issue that needs to be addressed. This can be seen as a way for Carter to shed light on these feminist issues built on Victorian beliefs, as will be further discussed in the next chapter.

In addition, Melanie expresses her coming-of-age phase by expressing not only her wish to be married but also to explore her sexuality: “Melanie prayed: ‘Please God, let me get married. Or, let me have sex” (8). In the very first pages, Carter exclusively paints a picture of Melanie’s desires and explorations of her sexuality. Whilst exploring these desires, a part of her feels and understands that in order to have sex she needs a partner. She has been made to believe she cannot do it alone, and therefore there is a shadow of her “groom” always lurching in the shadows of her fantasies. Carter attempts to show the unspoken difficulties in the young girls’ physical and emotional transitions in relation to the era while also acknowledging that female sexuality is often “an invention of patriarchy, resulting from a process of making meanings that exclude women themselves” (Hite, 123). Traditionally, female sexuality was written by men or through the point of view of men. However, many female writers, such as Carter, have made sure to make it apparent that their characters experience themselves as sexual rather than writing from “the standpoint of the outsider who experiences the sexed woman as an object of desire” (Hite, 121). In this novel, Carter illustrates that Melanie is a sexual being and struggles with the fact that her sexuality can be autonomous. In the same episode, when she tries on her role as a possible future wife, she touches upon the feminist idea of being “sufficient for herself in her own glory” and that she “did not need a groom” (Carter, 16); however, she also imagines herself “gift-wrapped” for her future husband (2). As Ayşe Gül Karaman points out, Melanie describes her body as a man would have, which shows that “she is never away from the male gaze on her mind” (23). Melanie, in this stage of her transition, is consumed by the idea of appealing to men’s desires, which in turn affects her emerging teenage identity. Her physical changes result in a mental
shift that causes her to take interest in things she did not care for before. However, due to her young age and her position between child and adult, she has to perform her fantasies by playing dress-up instead of acting on them. Andrew Hook Soon Ng points out that “[m]any of the depictions of performance/ performativity in [Carter’s] narratives are also related to sexuality which, for Carter, is simultaneously a site for transgression against and abject conformity to the patriarchal, heteronormative status quo” (413). This is evident in Melanie’s naïve beliefs about marriage. As pointed out earlier, Melanie is hesitant about the idea of marriage while wearing her mother’s dress. One explanation is that, as discussed earlier, she feels too young, while another is that “a potential partner has only existed on Melanie’s terms; now the reality of such a fate becomes apparent, and it alarms her” (Nyyssönen, 64). Both reasons indicate that it is too soon for her to entertain the idea of marriage.

In this section, I have discussed Melanie’s first transition and the influence of the women around her. She takes her first steps from a child to a woman, both physically and mentally. She begins to think of what a woman is and what will be expected of her. Also, she begins to view, criticize, and judge those around her, which brings forth her influenced perception of women. Additionally, she struggles with how to approach her awakened sexuality. In the next section, I will illustrate Melanie’s next transition and how it affects her journey.

From Teenager to Mother

Melanie’s transition takes a sudden turn when she has to take on a role that she is not ready or prepared to assume. After the death of her parents, she is forced to confront her own transition in addition to taking on the responsibility to look after her siblings. In a moment of sorrow, Melanie buries her mother’s dress and with it her fantasies because she accepts the responsibility as a “little mother to” her younger siblings (Carter, 28, italics mine). The word little here is an emphasis on the fact that she is still far too young and not yet of the appropriate age—neither mentally nor physically— to become a mother. While she is still a child and, therefore, should not have to bear the responsibility for her siblings, she comes to realize that she is “no longer a free agent” (31). Given that her siblings are young and unaware of their surroundings or recent events, she must take on the role of the mother and caregiver and acknowledges that “[t]he burden is all mine” (29). Now she becomes someone she is unfamiliar with. Melanie expresses, due to the loss of her freedom and sense of
personality, that a “[p]art of herself… was killed, a tender, budding part; the daisy-crowned young girl” (31). Because the change is ill-timed, it led to an identity crisis where she started to “[hate] the causal glimpses she got of her face” in the mirror (29). This is a contrast to how she viewed her reflection before. This reaction is because she cannot recognize herself when she looks in the mirror. Consequently, she breaks a mirror, in a scene after her parent’s death, in an attempt to see “herself gone” (25). The mirror is an important tool for Melanie, as she uses it to trace the physical changes that her body goes through. In the second half of the story, when Melanie has no access to mirrors, she begins to lose her sense of self.

Melanie’s adolescence is filled with anxiety in her role as the older sister, along with the expectations that follow the death of her parents. She compares herself to her younger siblings: her little sister, Victoria, who is too young to comprehend her parents’ death and their move to London; and her brother, Jonathan, who, although only a few years younger than Melnaie, is unmoved by the changes that have occurred. While Victoria is far too young to take any responsibility, Jonathan is old enough to share the responsibilities with Melanie, yet he chooses not to do so. Rather, he focuses on his own interests, clearly stating that “[he] would rather carry the model I am working on, in case it gets injured” instead of helping Melanie with taking care of their little sister (Carter, 32). This showcases that he is a man and does not feel responsible to step up and take on the role of care-giver. On the other hand, Melanie, as a girl, has been conditioned to fit a certain role. With time, she has adopted this mindset conditioning herself in the process to embody that role. Ever since she got her period, for example, she stopped climbing trees and wearing shorts during the summer. This indicates that she sees her period as the start of the journey to becoming a woman and sets herself apart from the opposite sex. In fact, she feels “pregnant with herself, bearing the slowly ripening embryo of Melanie-grown-up inside herself” (Carter, 20). That could, metaphorically, be read as she is carrying the uncompleted version of herself. Katri Nyyssönen writes that “the real and essential Melanie has yet to be born … This suggests that the Melanie who is acting presently has no agency of her own; she is merely performing mechanized rote motions as she waits for her adult self to emerge” (61). Melanie performs her duties and what is expected of her, though her real self will not break through until she finds her identity. The responsibility she must bear, and the intensity of the difficult and sensitive period, draws a picture where “the familiar embryo-within-an-adult is reversed to give an image of an infant body housing an adult” (Nyyssönen, 61). To emphasize the importance of Carter’s message, as can be seen in Melanie’s case, there are hidden struggles and expectations that are forced on girls to be the woman, the wife, and the care-giver, even
when it is out of place or when the girl is too young to take on such a role. Melanie did not choose to be the young mother to her younger siblings. It is a role that is cast and enforced on her as a consequence of her parent’s death. Because she is the oldest of the three siblings, and a girl, she indeed can fit into the ‘mother-figure’ function, which cannot be cast upon her much too young sister nor her carefree brother. As Karaman writes:

women and men never gain their true identities because they don’t make the decisions themselves. It disturbs woman’s identity more than man’s identity because it accepts man as superior to woman…The gender phenomenon subjects woman to social oppression in her deeds and decisions. She is expected and even forced to have all the subordinate roles like mother, wife, and sister to male authority (2).

As can be seen, Melanie’s journey of self-discovery is interrupted. This causes her identity to take on a new shape. In the next section, I will discuss the events and the challenges that change and shape Melanie’s views of adulthood.

From Teenager to Adult

The last phase of Melanie’s transition occurs in her uncle’s house in London, where Carter presents Aunt Margaret as a foil to the other women and as a different representation of female adulthood. Aunt Margaret is an Irish woman who married Uncle Philip only to become his property and slave more than a wife. Philip tries to control every aspect of his wife’s life. He is the head of the household and a tyrant; he is a personification of patriarchal values and behavior. Aunt Margaret is described as “dumb” (Carter, 37) and Uncle Philip demands the women of the house to wear “[n]o make-up” and to speak only when they are spoken to, because “[h]e likes, you know, silent women” (63, italics mine). As a result, Margaret became mute after getting married and communicates through writing instead. Margaret is to wear her silver necklace made by Philip as wedding gift; however, it is “heavy, crippling” and looked like it “might be very ancient.” The necklace “rose up almost to her chin so that she could hardly move her head” (112). This symbolizes the chains of marriage, which Melanie comes to witness and fear. It is also in contrast to her parent’s marriage and to Mrs. Rundle’s unmarried life. Before coming to her uncle’s house, Melanie dreamed of marriage and feared being undesirable. Now she has come to fear what ‘real’ marriage is like.
This can be seen when, in the attempt to help her Aunt Margaret with house chores, Melanie experiences her aunt’s life and reflects upon it: “‘[b]ut this can never be me, not really me!’ [b]ut it was” (Carter, 90). These were Melanie’s thoughts when she got a taste of the life that awaits her if she were to go down that rabbit hole. This is also confirmed and emphasized by the author through the statement “but it was.” What Melanie fears is the life that is unfolding in front of her eyes, since it provides first-hand experience of the gloomy future that she is unwilling to accept. In her first transition, Melanie looks down on Mrs. Rundle, deeming her life unworthy because she is unmarried. However, Melanie realizes that Margaret is more miserable and has lost her youth, beauty and freedom to marriage, the price she had to pay to fulfill this fantasy. On the other hand, Mrs. Rundle is an independent woman, a free agent, even though she is unmarried. This is an important message to consider, illuminated by Carter’s elegant way of addressing the feminist issues at the time.

However, Karaman argues that a “[w]oman’s pleasure is … only ensured as long as she conforms to social rules. That is to say, she is happy if she is married and necessary for some men… which Carter exemplifies through Margaret and Melanie” (13). Which is to say, what is important is to be a wife and to be married, not who you are married to. Although this statement is accurate at the time, we witness Carter’s bold attempt to point that out and that it needs to be addressed, through the same characters. The social rules are the reason why Margaret had to get married and why Melanie is so obsessed with the idea of getting married, as society has assessed the value of women according to the service she offers to a man. On the other hand, Margaret has done her duty by marrying Uncle Philip and is the pillar that holds the household together, yet she is unhappy and miserable. Melanie, in addition, is aware of and witnesses Margaret’s situation and struggles. This is perhaps Carter’s way to show that if Melanie were to follow the same path as Margaret, she too will face the opposite of a happy ending. Melanie and most girls her age share similar dreams, fantasies, and hopes. Those fantasies are constructed and based on finding prince charming, getting married and living happily ever after.

Perhaps not all hope is lost for Margaret. She grabs a piece of freedom in her rebellion against her husband with the late-night festivities that she has with her brothers, along with her forbidden relation with her brother Francie. Margaret’s infidelity “indicates [her] final repudiation of both her sexual and racial subordination” (Gamble, Monarchs, 254). It is an act that allows her to taste some happiness, perhaps in the act of rebellion itself. In other words, Margaret is aware of her imprisonment and hardships in this marriage and found the only way she could rebel against it. Because she is a woman, Margaret has also been subjected to
the idea of compulsory heteronormativity. She is involved in an incestuous relation with her brother because he is the only man that happens to be around, as she is not allowed to go outside on her own and possibly meet other men. Margaret, at first, seemed like the innocent and submissive ideal woman for Uncle Philip’s requirements; however, she is not. Additionally, her muteness “could also be interpreted as a subversive act on Margaret’s side” (Karaman, 36). This realization about Aunt Margaret’s life changes Melanie’s view of her and thus of herself. As Melanie identifies with the women that surround her, like her mother and Mrs. Rundle, she also identifies with Margaret as she is the only available example, in this stage, of a grown woman. Melanie thinks “[Margaret] must have lived for her brothers… she must have married Uncle Philip just to make a home for them when they were little. How can she ever have felt anything for him as a man?” (Carter, 123-24). As Melanie is in a similar situation where she also must care for her younger siblings, she can understand what Margaret had to go through when she was younger, as young adult and a young mother to her brothers. She chose the lesser evil: between either being orphaned and possibly homeless, with no food or shelter, or marrying Philip to provide for her siblings. Melanie had to make the same choice. She is an orphan who is unable to maintain and keep her parents’ home. The choice was to either live with her uncle or possibly become homeless.

In addition, an important part of Melanie’s transition while living with her uncle is the realization of the differences between what girls spend their adolescence fantasizing about and the reality of women’s sexual experiences. When relocating to her uncle’s house, Melanie also encounters Margaret’s brothers, Francie and Finn. They are the real men that represent the majority of the working-class. As Melanie has only met a small number of men in church on Sundays, who always dressed nice and smelled fresh and resembled the men in the magazines and the prince charming of fairy tales, meeting the Jowles men shocks Melanie, as they look untidy, wear dirty clothes, and reek of “animal” (36). Although she is conflicted, she is interested enough to experience her sexuality when the opportunity presents itself with Finn. A significant moment in the novel, to both Melanie and Finn, is their kiss in the pleasure garden, where a statue of Queen Victoria lay fallen on the ground. The fallen statue symbolizes the fallen Victorian era, which in its turn makes the garden a place where Melanie and Finn can express their feelings. Therefore, the garden represents this place where actions such as kissing are possible, because this is a place where the queen has metaphorically and symbolically fallen. If Philip’s house is where the old values still stand, then the garden is the place where the new and modern ideologies stand.
Finn’s intention to kiss Melanie evokes a feeling of discomfort in her, but also acceptance: “[a]t least she would have that much more experience, even if it was only Finn who kissed her” (Carter, 105). I will discuss Finn’s point of view in chapter 2. Notably, before the kiss she imagines how romantic it would seem from afar: “[s]he wished someone was watching them, to appreciate them, or that she herself was watching them, Finn kissing this black-haired young girl, from a bush a hundred yards away” (106). This emphasizes the fantasies that she has been imagining and the image of romance that she has been fed her whole life. It is not the fact that this is her first experience being attracted to a boy that is romantic, but rather, being watched or watching herself, as if the act itself is insignificant and the perception of it is the goal. As discussed in the first subchapter, and as Karaman points out, her identity is constituted by what is seen through the male gaze. The appeal of her experience is to be observed, not the experience itself (23, 24). Melanie’s sole focus is to fulfill the duties that are enforced on her by society. Her value is connected to being desirable and, thus, finding a husband and getting married. Therefore, the kiss causes her conflict: she ought to like it because it fulfills the fantasy, and she ought to like it because it also fulfills her duties as a woman, however, she does not: “[s]he choked and struggled, beating her fists against him, convulsed with horror at this sensual and intimate connection, this rude encroachment on her physical privacy, this humiliation” (Carter, 106). She is but a child in transition, not ready to take such a step. It stands in stark contrast to what she wanted in the beginning, but that was mere fantasy. When it finally happened in real life, it was suddenly too real. As Karaman writes: “she suddenly realizes that her obsession to have some relations with a man is a result of social oppression” (36) and of compulsory heteronormativity, which is the basis of patriarchal society.

Nonetheless, “[Melanie] longs for everything that the conventional woman is expected to wish. In fact Melanie’s obsession with her outlook and desires to appeal to male taste relates to women’s inferior position in society” (Karaman, 24). Her confusion can be further seen in how later, in her room alone, she contemplates the incident, questioning what she had experienced and questioning herself: “[i]s there something wrong with me that I felt such a blackness? And after that it seemed so horrible, is there something even more wrong with me because I thought it was so horrible?” (Carter, 107). Rather than questioning Finn’s actions and intentions she blames herself for not enjoying the experience. Because even though Finn does not represent the image of prince charming, as Melanie describes him as dirty and smelly, his kiss still “proved her femininity” (Karaman, 36). Hence, Melanie is willing to look the other way about how the kiss made her feel. In the end, as suggested by
Karaman, it proves that Melanie is happy if she is desirable and in some sort of relationship with a man, even if it is Finn. Eventually, she accepts Finn as a potential partner. In a scene where Melanie and Finn lay together on her bed, she experiences real closeness and her real sexual awakening: “[n]o more false starts, as in the pleasure gardens, but the real beginning of a deep mystery between them” (149). Melanie realizes that in this moment she is no longer the child that fantasizes about love in fairy tales but that this is the real moment she becomes a woman and sees what is truly important.

As I have put forth in this chapter as a whole, marriage is not a magical solution to life but a harsh reality, existing within a patriarchal society—a world where women are inferior, expected to be perfect and act accordingly. Melanie’s upbringing, along with the world that surrounds her, influences her thinking about her role as a woman, based on the patriarchal, Victorian values. Adolescence becomes a period in a woman’s life to stress about meeting prince charming, getting married, and living happily ever after. With adolescence, additionally, comes confusion, trying to figure out who you are and where you stand in the world, and, also, more responsibilities. In the “attempt to define her femininity; [Melanie] must navigate the myriad of feminine representations that she has encountered and process them alone” (Nyyssönen, 60). I have shown this throughout the analysis. The core issues of patriarchal society remain, and society will remain unchanged if the same ideologies and gender roles are passed on to the next generation. This will be the focus in the next chapter.
Chapter 2: The Persistent Past

_The Magic Toyshop_ is Carter’s comment on the ongoing legacy of patriarchy and its continued hold on society. Additionally, Gamble comments that “the Victorian age is ‘history’ that has never quite become ‘past,’ and is thus suspended perpetually on the point of return” (Monarchs, 255). This can be seen in the household dynamic and the clash between Victorian values, represented by Uncle Philip, and the desired freedom, represented by Finn and Melanie. In this chapter, I will discuss the persistent past and its influence on our heroine in contrast to the male characters.

Uncle Philip can be seen as a personification of patriarchal Victorian values. It is illustrated when Melanie sees her parents’ wedding picture and realizes that her uncle looks different. That he, compared to the rest who stood in the picture, “was a colour that clashed; or, rather, a patch of no colour at all” (Carter, 13). This was our first clue in the novel of the two worlds that existed within the same frame, the simultaneity of the modern and the old-fashioned. Melanie’s uncle represents that old-fashioned, colorless Victorian era. She remarked that “[h]e occupied a quite different time” (13). Perhaps, Carter is trying to say that this colorless part of history should not exist anymore and should stay in the past where it belongs. When Melanie moves to her uncle’s house, it confirms this image of him. The life Melanie leads at Uncle Philip’s house is that of the typical patriarchal, Victorian standards. Women are to tend to the household duties and are prohibited to get an education. Moreover, there is a lack of privacy and mirrors in the house, which is important to the heroine, as was discussed in the earlier chapter. In other words, patriarchal, Victorian values rule the household and the women in it. Helene Cixous discusses how “[w]omen [are] [i]nvisible as humans. But, of course, perceived as tools– dirty, stupid, lazy, underhanded, etc” (70).

Cixous means that this is how women are viewed by society and men, where men’s power was gained by repressing marginal groups. The patriarchal, Victorian rule viewed women as weak, naïve and a tool– seen as servants to their husbands and household responsibilities– where women submit to men’s law and rule.

In Carter’s novel, Uncle Philip enforces his tyranny through similar means. Marley Coody comments that _The Magic toyshop_ is

reminiscent of Cinderella; a girl of a higher class or stature is lowered after her father’s death to nothing more than a servant by some wicked force and is forcibly kept in that low position. In Melanie’s case it is the wicked uncle who keeps her in
what he believes to be a “woman’s place”; he essentially forces her into a stereotypical box of what women are supposed to be (8).

To have a better understanding of Uncle Philip’s rule and tyranny, his relationship to his wife demonstrates the expectations and role she is to play as a woman and a wife in that household, within that “box”. Uncle Philip, as Melanie describes him,

never talked to his wife except to bark brusque commands. He gave her a necklace that choked her. He beat her younger brother. He chilled the air through which he moved. His towering, blank-eyed presence at the head of the table drew the savour from the good food she cooked. He suppressed the idea of laughter (Carter, 124).

Aunt Margaret is, therefore, a slave, a possession, a piece of equipment that performs a duty and a need instead of being her own person. She was denied having children by her husband against her desire. It can be seen as a way for Philip to ensure that she does not have her own agency, her own independent role apart from being his wife. Arguably, baring a child, would make Margaret a mother, a role that would be empowering, deeming her uncontrollable by her husband, since he alone casts the roles for the residents of his house/world. Philip, as a toy master, desires to control them, pulling their strings, as he does his puppets. Consequently, “[t]hese puppet- people’s senses are no longer their own… their desires are orchestrated to fit Philip’s [poetry]” (Waite, 5). He not only controls the women in his household, but also their fate, according to his vision and fantasy.

Soon, Melanie finds herself an actual puppet, a part of both her uncle’s rigid rules and his theater. Philip’s choice of profession as a toymaker shows his intentions. His toyshop and his household are run in the same way, where the subjects of the household are given roles to play in life, and in the plays he organizes with his other dolls. Philip is the master and Melanie is the marionette, to further imply their expected roles. Additionally, “Philip’s deliberate confinement of the practice of puppetry within the home emphasises the extent to which it is tied up with his desire to dominate the domestic space” (Gamble, Monarchs, 249). It shows the desired power of the patriarchal head of the household and the submission of its residents. This can further be seen in how Margaret “lives obediently under Uncle Philip’s absolute power and whose silent existence mimics that of his inanimate dolls and puppets” (Mitchell, 7). Moreover, his occupation demonstrates “his wish to be surrounded only by inanimate, passive women who resemble his self-made dolls and puppets as well as his
implementation of gender performativity within the theatre box” (Mitchell, 7). Phillip’s rule, in the home and in his theater, is Melanie’s first introduction to this persistent patriarchal, Victorian way of living, specifically regarding gender-roles. When Philip is presented with an antagonist such as Melanie, whose upbringing is that of modern values, it threatens his rule and power. Thus, Melanie “represent[s] the enemy to him, who use this toilet paper and fish knives… so fresh and innocent, all of you, and so you're something to change and destroy” (Carter, 152). Carter clearly states that Philip resents her because “she was not a puppet” (144). In Phillip’s play, a remake of the story of Leda and the swan from Greek mythology, Melanie is to perform the role of Leda. The story tells of the girl Leda who is seduced and has sex with the Greek god Zeus, in the shape of a swan. Phillip metaphorically sets the stage for Melanie, as Leda, and Finn, as the swan, to rehearse in private for the play that is to be performed later in his theater. By orchestrating this opportunity, Philip aims for Finn to have intercourse with Melanie, thus ruining her: “‘[y]ou see, [Finn] said, ‘he wanted me to fuck you’’” (151). When Finn failed to do as he was told, Philip took matters into his own hands to symbolically “fuck”, ruin, and dishonor his niece as revenge on the modern advances of the time, as he represents the old and proud times. As Gamble clarifies, through “pulling the strings” of the swan that Phillip used for the play from high up in the flies of the stage, Uncle Philip “attempts to assert his god-like authority over his household through the symbolic rape of his niece” (Monarchs, 253). By casting Melanie into these different roles, Gamble states that “Carter pinpoints the ambiguities in woman’s position. She foregrounds the contradiction between the romantic images of femininity reproduced in culture and art, and the facts of sexual violence” (Fiction, 34).

The other men in the novel are also an interesting factor to investigate in terms of how they react to the patriarchal society represented by Uncle Philip. As previously mentioned, Philip exercises his control over everyone in the house, including the men as they all are his subjects and puppets. Although the men are not treated in the same way as the women are, it is important to look at them precisely because of this difference, since men and women are caught up in a web of age-old cultural determinations…One can no more speak of “woman” than of “man” without being trapped within an ideological theater” where the many “representations” and “identifications” constantly change the assimilated identity of everyone and prevent any changes to the status quo (Cixous, 83).
In other words, it would be unjust to analyze gender roles only from the female perspective, as men also struggle with their roles in patriarchal society. Just as Uncle Philip represents the generic patriarch, his household represents patriarchal society. Although the treatment of men and women differ, it is not enough to be a man to deserve his favoritism. He is “delighted” with Johnathan and “[h]e will probably apprentice him” (115), yet Philip thinks Finn is “God’s scum” (152). Arguably, the reason for Philip’s favoritism is that Jonathan measures up to his ideals, as he is a “small Uncle Philip, detached and unreachable” (Forcatho, 53). Melanie observes that “Jonathon hardly seems to be there. As though the real Jonathon is somewhere else and has left a copy of himself behind” (Carter, 116). As mentioned in chapter one, Johnathon is neither interested nor obligated to take responsibility for his siblings, instead he is free to explore his interests, which are similar to Philip’s. Thus, it strengthens the notion that Jonathon’s role in the patriarchal system is fixed and his life is unaffected by the changes that caused Melanie’s multiple transitions. On the other hand, “Unlike self-centered Jonathon who remains distant and unbothered from beginning to end, Finn comes across as a sensitive young boy whose kindness and tenderness are smothered away” (Forcatho, 141). This shows a contrast between the men in the story. Finn, unlike Jonathan, eventually refuses the expected typical role of a man.

For example, in the beginning, Finn acted towards Melanie in a way that showed him to be like Philip in his thinking. Nevertheless, he changes when he realizes the horror of Philip’s ways and what they represent. This can be seen in his different demeanor between when he kissed Melanie and when he was asked, by Philip, to have sex with her. When Finn kisses Melanie, he exclaims: “[l]ook on my works, ye mighty, and beware”, even though Melanie reacts with “convulsed horror” and “beating her fists against him” (106). In this scene, he is a man exercising his right to take what he wants. He is proud of himself and his actions. This shows that Finn has practiced Victorian values and beliefs of his male superiority. Flávia Forcatho puts forth that Finn’s “hardships of life, mainly Uncle Philip’s abuse, harden[s] Finn until he is apt to become the perpetrator of the pains he and his loved ones have endured” (141). However, when Philip commands Finn to do his bidding, to act as his proxy in the rape of Melanie, Finn fiercely refuses. He states: “‘I’m not going to do what he wants even if I do fancy you’” (Carter, 152). This showcases Finn’s “recognition, and refusal, of his role as puppet, and suggests the possibility that he offers an alternative to Uncle Philip’s patriarchal dictatorship”(Gamble, Monarchs, 249-50, footnote). By refusing to do Philip’s bidding, he also takes a step forward in that transition between the Victorian man
and the man he actually is. His refusal to abide by those values makes him, as well as Melanie, a fighter against tyranny, rigid rules and values of a fallen era.

Finn, in an epiphany, realizes to what extent Philip is pulling his strings. When asked, by Philip, to “Go up and rehearse a rape with Melanie,” Finn, in shock, exclaims “Christ[!] He wanted me to do you and he set the scene. Ah, he's evil!” (152, italics mine). As Finn comes to understand the evil in Philip’s ways, he now fears becoming like him. In a moment of rebellion, Finn chops up the puppet, a swan, that Philip intended to use to rape Melanie. The swan is then buried next to a fallen statue of Queen Victoria. Both the swan and queen Victoria “are strange, and in some ways downright ridiculous, symbols of conservative nineteenth-century patriarchy … yet while they embody masculinist ideals only imperfectly, they are incarnations of an absolutely real authority” (Gamble, Monarchs, 254). It can, then, be interpreted as the symbolic burial of Philip as the swan represents him and the statue represents Victorian values, both now fallen and destroyed. Finn’s reasons for destroying the puppet after the play was partly for Melanie’s sake and partly because Philip “put himself into it” (Carter, 174). This shows that he wanted to put a stop to Philip’s rule. Finn, thus, represents a different set of values that could, given the space, replace values of a persistent past. Finn’s actions are what is needed to put an end to this unjust patriarchal society that is enforced on both men and women; “[o]nce Finn has buried [the swan], Philip is left with no foundation on which to base his tyranny” (Gamble, Monarchs, 254). In addition to losing his alter ego as puppet master, Philip also witnesses his wife’s rebellion with her lover. This causes him to burn everything to the ground in an attempt to destroy what he could not control: “[c]aught up in his final act of (self) destruction, Philip is revealed as the unstable megalomaniac he has been all along” (Gamble, Monarchs, 254). Yet, Melanie and Finn survive, which is further proof that their generation and their values will survive, and the dictatorship of Victorian values will dissolve into ashes.

In this chapter, I have put forth the evidence to support the reading of Uncle Philip as a personification of patriarchy and Victorian values. His tyranny is founded on women’s submission and that they ought to be invisible and quiet—much like his puppets. Melanie proves to be a threat to his values and his rule, which causes him to seek her destruction. I have also compared Melanie’s experience to that of her brother and Finn. In the end, Melanie and Finn triumph over Philip’s attempts to keep his rule. Arguably, Carter suggests that when men refuse their typical role as head of the household, then and only then will the system symbolically burn down to ashes and men and women will stand side by side as equals to form a new society based on gender equality.
Conclusion: The Resolution

This thesis analyzes how *The Magic Toyshop* can be read, through Melanie, as an allegory of women’s struggles during their coming-of-age journeys, demonstrating the effects and consequences that patriarchal Victorian values have on both women and men. I have outlined, in the introduction, the fact that the novel mirrors the author’s own experiences, which already proves, in a way, that the novel is an allegory of women’s struggles. However, I found it necessary to include a more thorough discussion of Melanie as a character because it allegorizes more than just Carter’s experience. In chapter one, Melanie undergoes three distinct transitions, following the women in her life. Through having to navigate these transitions, Melanie takes on, and struggles with, various identities that clash with her state of mind at the time. She starts with an image of being an adult married to prince charming, while at the same time she realizes, when wearing her mother’s wedding dress, that this role is “too big.” Then, while still dealing with these emotions, she finds herself forced to be a young mother to her siblings, which causes her to lose parts of herself. Finally, when she moves to her uncle’s house, she is simultaneously shocked and accepting of her uncle and aunt’s marriage, showcasing her incomplete and various struggling identities.

In chapter two, I analyzed Uncle Philip as the ultimate patriarchal figure, showing how his tyranny and rule, based on Victorian values, affected all members of the household. The household, in turn, is seen an allegory of patriarchal society, “making *The Magic Toyshop* a critique of the continued survival of the Victorian within contemporary culture” (Gamble, Monarchs, 255). I discussed the consequences of these values on both the women and men, where all were affected, to some degree, by the expectations of Uncle Philip. In the end, Philip did not have the complete control he thought he did, proving that his power was not ultimate, working as further criticism of what he stands for. When everything burns down, Finn and Melanie escape together, to start something new, leaving the past behind. However, the ending is ambiguous. One can conclude that either that they will establish a new relationship based on equality, throwing away the old order, or that they will simply start the cycle over. Due to the lack of closure, Carter instead creates “a narrative loop, in which the ending leads us back to the beginning of the tale” (Gargano, 76). In my reading, this gives Melanie a chance to explore the person she wants to become, which we got a glimpse of in the very first pages of the novel. In conclusion, although it is a fairy tale in its setting, *The Magic Toyshop* is a coming-of-age novel, displaying the hardships and struggles that
accompany the life of a teenager. The story portrays eloquently the confusion, self-awareness, sexual awakening, sense of responsibility, coming of age, and social expectations of a teenager.
Works Cited


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